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ABSTRACT

This paper is a transcript of a videotaped roundtable discussion on the role of volunteers in adult literacy in Canada. The participants expressed concern that tutors may not be able to provide the quality of learning experience for adult students that trained teachers could and that volunteers could be taking jobs that should go to trained teachers. They recognized, however, that volunteers have a role to play in community programs and that resources would not stretch to pay for all the tutors. Panelists commented that volunteers need ongoing training, not just oneshot orientation programs, if they are to improve and benefit their students. It was also noted that the volunteers who serve on the boards of directors of literacy programs could use training in the concepts of literacy education. (KC)

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ED 383 908

THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN ADULT LITERACY

Roundtable

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Literacy Branch
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ROUND TABLE #2

Arthur Bull

Why are we training volunteers in the first place? Why are volunteers so central to the literacy field? And, to oppose that question, maybe I'll play the devil's advocate role a little bit, and say that, an opinion I've heard before and I'm sure lots of people still have, you know, why volunteers? You know, are we just downgrading the adult education field by using volunteers? Shouldn't we be looking to full-paid professionals? Aren't we giving people something which is, in fact...if the truth be known, kind of a second rate solution? So, I'm going to throw that out and then whoever wants to pick it up...

Jean Unda

We'd love to jump in. What's interesting is, in the late 70's, at adult services unit at St. Christopher House, we collectively wrote a thing on literacy, charitable enterprise, or political right - which was way back then. However, I think if you look at, historically at, why volunteers became involved was sure, government wasn't interested in adult literacy. People saw it as a way to get the foot in the door and to get things started and to begin to build a sense of a need and a possibility of meeting that need. People got in as volunteers at the fifth column.

I think now that we're developed, we've established the field. Now, I think, there can be some differentiation and to say: Okay - I agree, we need professionalisation. But, what clouds it, is the fact that, many people who started as volunteers are the same ones who want to move up and become professionalised. That is not say, however, that there is no role for people truly as volunteers.

Perhaps in some other ways, Mary, that you mentioned - talking about different roles; different things that have to be done and could be done by people with different degrees of experience and expertise in the field. Before, we have really been treating volunteers as people we expected to be professional and they were fulfilling professional roles. And, me, now coming from the Ontario Federation of Labour who represents organized workers. We would be in a terrible situation if we were saying that our workers, who are trained as volunteer instructors in B.E.F.S.T., you know, are replacing teachers in boards of education and community colleges. What we're saying is: No. We're doing something different. There is a role for professionals. There's, also, a role, in our case, for volunteers doing labour education because all labour education is volunteer work. So, I think, we have to have different expectations and say there's the need for both.

Mary Norton

I'd like to take up the issue of, sort of, second class provision. That's one way of looking at it. I think the other way has to do more with whether we can expect volunteers to meet the needs of... on a volunteer basis. So, looking at it more from the issue of whether you get people to do work for nothing, which is a bit related to you. So, that would be one response to that. I think on the terms of the...I guess really what I'm getting at is the quality of education that a person who wants to learn to read and write might get. I think that leads us into something that Robin was starting to talk about - the type of needs that a person might have. For a person who left school early and had other things to do and didn't learn to read because of reasons, sort of, external to what was going on, in terms of learning, and may just need to do some more reading with a little bit of guidance to get on with it. I think a tutor might have a role there. It could be a very informal role. Robin and I were discussing how many of the people who come into literacy programs have been through school and for a variety of reasons, external and internal, don't learn to read and so could benefit, perhaps, from - not perhaps, but could likely benefit from more on-going work and work with people who've had a lot of experience and a lot of experience and practice to draw from which we just can't find with a volunteer who is working once a week and, maybe, for six months.

Robin Millar

Yeah, I found, I mean, certainly in the States and even locally in Manitoba, -people who were reading, for a lack of terminology, below grade 4, are often the ones that are delivered to volunteer programs. Often out of that population, those are people who fall into that category of having been to school; having some kind of learning difficulties and needing some specific kind of learning strategies and approaches that are unlikely to have been acquired by volunteer tutors. Not due to any ill will or, even, lack of desire on their own part, but just lack of experience in the field. Occasionally, I know those folks are trained teachers, and that's useful, and they can be utilized in that way. But, a lot of times, they're not. That's when the quality does come into it.

It seems to me, that the people who need the most experienced adult education and adult literacy workers, are the people that aren't getting them. The people with the most experience are teaching the upper levels who, I figure, a good trained volunteer would do the best work with.

Audrey Anderson

I agree that, that's a bit backwards. I think we have, also, got another area a bit backwards. That is, we speak a lot about the importance of building on the learning strengths of our...of the

learners. We haven't applied that same methodology or philosophy to the tutors, in that we haven't, maybe, spent the same kind of attention finding out...what are the skills that the tutor brings to the job or brings to the program? Then, how can we access that skill and strength for the purposes of the program. I link this in terms of saying...we're, also, saying that literacy is a community issue - it's not, as you were saying, it's not something that you do first. It just happens to be a vehicle through which you can, also, access different aspects of your community life, work, social, personal, etc.

So, what I think that the...what I think the role for volunteer tutors can be is that...if we were to find out, for example, a tutor who comes in to the program happens to be a, say, an electrician or happens to be an artist or happens to be whatever area that we can identify, we should take those strengths and say, "Okay, when we have a learner who needs more information in that particular area - we can certainly top them in terms of just materials development and say, "Well, how can you help us with this material". But, we can also go the other way, which is to say, "Okay, as an electrician, or as a carpenter, or as a teacher, or whatever else you do in the other part of your life, you're dealing with people who, if we believe the statistics, 25% or so, are going to have difficulties with reading and writing. Therefore, how can we teach you means of conveying the information that you do on a daily level in your jobs, in your personal life, or whatever. How can we, as adult educators, teach you something about how you can either simplify your working materials? How can you simplify or change your method of delivery or plain speaking, plain writing? So, that, in that sense, they go back in their normal lives - go back into the community, and we've given them a skill which will have a much greater impact than just working with, say, a one to one situation.

Guy Ewing

I think that a couple of you have implied that, you know, there is a niche for literacy volunteers and I definitely agree with that, although, as a program, I think we, like a lot of other programs would like to be less reliant on volunteers. But, a lot of creative things do come out of the volunteers.

It would feel wrong not to have volunteers in a community program, for me. One aspect of volunteers that seems very positive to me is that process that somebody mentioned of being a tutor and then becoming a literacy worker. It's a way that a person in a particular community without, necessarily, any formal teachers' training or background of that kind can become part of a literacy program. It's something that kind of renews the program. So, I think there are positive aspects to having a program that brings people in front of the community as volunteers. As you were mentioning, they go out into the community again and influence how things are done in the community. But, I agree with the view that it's unfortunate that

we have to rely, as much as we do, on volunteers.

Mary Norton

The term volunteer only has bad connotations for me, when it's used to replace people that might be paid. I think the idea of...what's coming to mind as we're talking is the idea of a literacy volunteer in the same way as I'm a volunteer on certain boards and certain community organizations. That could be anybody within a literacy organization whether they're there as someone who's learning to read and write or someone who's helping someone learn to read and write.

So, if we started thinking about literacy volunteers as any participants, and I've often argued that people who are learning are also volunteers because they're there as volunteers. And, then, maybe, thinking in terms of tutors. In many cases, they're unpaid but, as we seem to be thinking about how they might be paid.

I think in your case, Jean, it's an interesting situation in which people do have something very much in common. So, the tutoring there...they're involved in a common endeavour. I think that's different from someone from the community who may not even know the person that they end up tutoring.

Jean Unda

Although, some programs have made an effort to, in fact, get people from the community even though...because it can happen, also, in the workplace where you don't know if it's a big workplace.

Mary Norton

Something more in common...

Jean Unda

Something more in common rather than this outsider parachuting in.

Arthur Bull

So, really, what is the purpose of volunteer tutor training? Or, what should it be, maybe I should say? Are we looking at really training people in the skills of literacy practice or are we, perhaps, doing some kind of awareness education? We're just making the people aware of the basic issues which will, perhaps, prepare them more than specific methodologies. Maybe, we're just looking at an introduction. Maybe what we call tutor training

really is just: here's our program, here's how it works and you're probably going to learn about how to be a tutor by being a tutor and we'll help you. And, maybe, there are other purposes to tutor training? Quite likely it's a mixture of those things. How do you...any reaction to that, in terms of, what we're trying to do when we, quote unquote, train volunteers?

Mary Norton

So, if we're looking...thinking then in terms of the...and, I've worked around that word of "training", too, I can get really involved in talking about words. You know, we've used preparation to avoid, again, those kind of narrow focus training. There's the education...so, I'm more inclined to think in terms of the work that's done with tutors before they get started is to give them a framework for working, I think, rather than kind of specific skills to work on. I think, also, it goes back to what the expectations of tutors...whether they're volunteered or paid, but people who are coming out of the community who don't have necessarily a lot of formal education themselves and who certainly don't have education about education or teaching training or beyond that.

I really do feel quite strongly that the role that those tutors can play is in the more general sense of working with people to involve them in reading and writing. We've talked, at length, about, you know, if you're going to learn to read, you have to read. If you're going to learn to write, you have to write. I think there's a real role for those kinds of tutors. Then, the more specific work that may have to go on with people who aren't learning easily, who aren't learning just by having lots of experience reading and writing with other people and seeing how literacy is a social kind of interaction. Then, I think that's where we need to have...could be one of the tutors who goes on and on and on and does more and more work, but, I think for the general tutor from the community, there needs to be a kind of general approach. A framework - a way of thinking about what reading and writing is within that community.

Robin Millar

Yeah, I think the programs that I've seen that are the most successful - who use either a combination of community volunteers and peer tutors within the program are using them as adjuncts to the program. The volunteers are actually integrated within the program. It's not, here's your pair, you go off and do a bunch with them. It's much more the volunteer is augmenting some other activities that are taking place within the program setting be it on sight or in some other kind of capacity. It seems to me, that kind of, then, training becomes quite relevant for those folks, which is, your role will really be as facilitator and as a model of what reading is as an avenue to set up those sorts of things, like you say, in journey workers of helping the person feel like a reader and feel like a writer and begin to perceive

of themselves as what it is to be in those roles. That's really what volunteers can do rather than teaching somebody the sounds of the alphabet or the process of learning to read.

Mary Norton

This goes back, though, to what you were talking about earlier, Arthur. We talked about a learner-centred approach in terms of the people learning to read and write, but what about the tutors? I'm becoming more and more convinced, particularly since I've just recently done a spate of tutor training, that to do the kind of eight weeks or one week-end or, whatever, all in a shot and then people go out and get matched isn't working. I think, if people could come for an orientation, in the sense that, literacy really is something we do out there in the world - it's not the alphabet. And, here are some things to think about when you're working with another person and you know about learning so why don't you use what you know? Then, you go out and get matched up and ideally in a learning centre where teaching and learning is going on with people who've been doing it for a while so there's more of a modelling kind of thing. Then when you come back for some more training, whether it's around approaches to helping someone to read, or even, if it's with some spelling techniques, or word identification, or whatever, you then have a frame of reference which, then, to me would be the more...you're relating then to the needs of the tutor.

Jean Unda

Exactly.

Guy Ewing

I just wanted to say that one of the most important things that I think we can accomplish in the tutor training is to open the tutor up to the attitude that he or she is going to use his or her own experience with that learner and that group of learners to create something together. Just the relationship is the most crucial thing, I think we can talk about in the tutor training and get people to see that the relationship can be a more equal one than it might otherwise be and that the tutor can learn from the learner how to take the next step.

Mary Norton

I haven't actually come across to many tutors that don't think that way. I find tutors are more concerned that they're not going to be able to do anything than coming and thinking well, I know all this stuff and I'm going to teach this person to read. I mean, there's... the person does come in like that. The inequality kind of thing, I don't find so much in that.

Guy Ewing

I think some tutors come to a training wanting to be made experts very quickly or, sort of, to be given a, sort of a, set method to use that will make them the expert and the tutor the learner on whatever the expert is working on. And, so, one of the very exciting things for me is, as a tutor trainee, was having gone through formal teacher training, it was really exciting for me to have a lot of the kinds of things that go on in learning to read and write demystified and to be told that if I just kept my eyes open and watched what was happening that I could probably come up with some really good, you know, ways of working. So, to me that's a really...to get the self-confidence to do that first of all as a tutor and then just to go ahead and do that is a very important point.

Arthur Bull

I'd like to pose one final question at this point before we open up to more questions. In terms of people who are training tutors or the tutor-trainers, so-called, how can we best support them in developing the knowledge and the skills and the awareness necessary to be a tutor trainer? We've talked a little bit about literacy workers but we've mostly been talking about volunteers. What about somebody who comes into a program, who is hired on as a program coordinator and all of a sudden has this task of training these volunteers and is faced with a waiting list of twenty volunteers and a number of optional methodologies, and essentially, is walking into that situation with little preparation. What's the best way to support that person?

Mary Norton

When I heard the twenty volunteers and heard it because it's not that far from the truth, one of the things that we've talked about in Alberta...and there is becoming a more in-place program for levels of development for people working in the field. One of the suggestions that we've been talking about is when someone is hired on - whether it's a program that is already in place or a new program - it's more and more a case of a program that's already in place. So, they have three months where they can just figure out what the program is all about and do some tutoring. So, their first responsibility is to be a tutor themselves. If the volunteers have wait for three months, well, better that they wait. You just let people know that there's a transition period here. I know too many people who'd been hired for workshops next week and - how do I do this? - a real panic. I don't think it really benefits...so, in a way, that's a bit of the apprenticeship, in my own view. So many of the coordinators come in who have not tutored and end up training without ever tutored. So, there's some time there to learn about it.

Audrey Anderson

I just would also like to know that, in terms of, how we can support program coordinators in this situation or, the trainers. I think that, as the concept of literacy as community development and as we define it in a different way, we're moving ahead as staff people, maybe even, volunteers moving ahead and their understanding of that but, I think, an area that we're leaving behind are the boards. This is something that is maybe unique to Ontario in that so many of our literacy programs are community based and, therefore, directed by a board...a volunteer board.

So, I'm addressing my comment to that situation. But, that board often has very little understanding of what literacy is. There understanding of it is it is teaching the alphabet. So, I think that...I, also, realize now that as we are supporting the staff people and the learners and the volunteers, we've really left out the key one which, theoretically, is the on-going body which is the board of directors.

Guy Ewing

There's another kind of support that I think is important and that's, I don't know what to call it...intellectual support, perhaps. I think one of the things that makes me very nervous about community literacy and literacy, in general, is that so much of what we know is just past on orally from person to person and if a program goes, the knowledge goes, as well. I think it's really imperative for somehow to find a (...) to, you know, document and create some kind of literature about the kind of work we do and, I think, it's actually one of the very exciting things, you know, for me, in literacy work, is that some incredible things have developed in a grassroots way. Some incredible ways of looking at learning have developed. I think there are actually ways of looking at learning that challenge and knowledge, for that matter, that challenge traditional teaching methodologies, all of which are very well documented, however, and very accessible. So, it's critically important, I think, for this stuff to get down in writing. I think that's, also, a type of support.